

## A plan for teaching Music Theory, Note-reading and Pre-reading activities to Suzuki students

### Background

All over the world, there are many excellent musicians who have neither learnt to read music, nor learnt music theory. At the other extreme, there is the classical musician who is highly skilled at interpreting the wishes of the composer as depicted by a music score, but who has never learnt to play by ear or improvise. Both scenarios are limiting, in that should they come across each other, these musicians will find it hard to create music together, or move outside their respective musical worlds. Learning via the Suzuki method offers the opportunity to combine both of these scenarios, in that note-reading and theory are eventually introduced, but as second priority to aural and technical musicianship, which must first be firmly established.

As originally devised, the Suzuki method did not include note-reading for its pupils until the relatively advanced stages of learning. When it reached America, there was some criticism of the method, as at its very extreme, musicians were produced who though they could play beautifully by ear, would have had difficulty with playing with others outside the world of Suzuki training. Some say the method was (and still can be) taken too literally in this respect, because in Japan at the time, pupils were taught how to read music in school. However, what is universally agreed is that Suzuki's original intention was to give priority to good posture, technique and tone, before note-reading is introduced.

Suzuki also felt that the language of music, expressed through a musical instrument, should be learnt in the same way that verbal language is learnt by young children - via listening and copying - the so called natural 'Mother tongue method'. In this way, just as a child learns to speak before it can read and write, so it learns the rudiments of making music before learning to read and write it down. This is of great benefit to the student, as they become secure in their physical habits and musicality, before having to address the additional challenge of recognising the complex variety of symbols on a page, and how they relate to the sound being produced.

Why teach note-reading and music theory? Both these things give a musician a distinct advantage. Just like the educational progress that comes with learning to read and write, music theory and note-reading enable musicians to easily learn music written by others; present their own compositions for others to learn; explore and perform unfamiliar styles of music, and develop the confidence to try new things. Understanding music theory means knowing the language of music, and in this way, musicians are in a better position to collaborate creatively with others. The Suzuki method has the potential to combine both the intuitive musicianship of the aural musician, and best of a 'traditional' training - creating confident, technically sound musicians who can both contribute their own work to the evolution of musical culture, and benefit from the contribution of others.

Opinions have been divided as to the best time to introduce note-reading and theory. It certainly makes sense that since traditionally, Suzuki students have started learning to play their instrument as young as two or three, it is not necessary nor desirable to teach these formally, before the child has begun to read or write. The fact that the Suzuki method has the reputation for the 'late' introduction of note-reading does make sense in the context of the knowledge that some children have been known to reach Book 4 or 5 by the age of six or seven, when they may only just have started learning to read. In Suzuki's own book, *Note-reading for violin*, note-reading exercises are included for all volumes, up to and including the Seitz Concerto in Volume 4. Suzuki introduces the book thus:

*'This book is for children having difficulty due to a poor comprehension of written music for violin. Following the order of the Suzuki violin textbooks, this book will describe note-reading, music theory, how to practice, and will provide material that children should use to learn to play from music. I will be happy if this proves helpful to parents and children in solving those problems that arise during practice'.*

This seems to suggest that the book is intended less as a systematic method, but rather for parents who cannot read music, as reinforcement for the natural step-by step introduction of note-reading and theory by the teacher, however they may choose to do it - assuming the child has not already been taught in school.

Emphasis is placed on the pupil saying finger numbers as notes are read, before letter names are learnt. This would seem a logical progression from saying finger numbers as notes are played, which could be a first step in preparation. There is also practice at writing in the notes below finger numbers. This book however has not been adapted for other instruments, and is not as popular as some of the other more child-friendly material that has since become available, that has larger staves and minimal writing on the page. So it is very much down to the individual teacher as to what materials to use, and how and when to introduce note-reading and theory for each individual child, depending on their age and learning style.

### Integrating note-reading and theory into individual and group lessons

This starts with Pre-Twinkle activities. Rhythm can be introduced first, through clapping and recognition of the various Twinkle rhythms, and copy-cat rhythms. Children can be encouraged to use their body to create rhythms - body percussion, stamping, and where space permits, walking, jogging or galloping. Twinkle rhythms are known by their various names - '*Wish I had an ice-cream*'; *I stop, you stop*; *Strawberry Strawberry*; *Fatter than a Caterpillar*; *Nellie the Elephant*. Subsequent pieces can be clapped and sung with lyrics, or sung using rhythm names such as those suggested by Suzuki (Ta, Tata, Takataka and Ta-ah), or other popular rhythm names. Again, where space permits, character can be attributed to pieces through different kinds of physical activity - eg. marching or tiptoeing around the room - to foster an early awareness of dynamic contrast. Flashcards of the *Twinkle* rhythms can also be used, for instance to test recognition or to choose a rhythm to play.

Next, the concept of pitch can be introduced, using hands to show how the music moves between low and high notes. The concept of intervals can be introduced using the *Solfa* system, for instance *Doh So* to describe the interval of a fifth - using Curwen hand signs. This is instantly applicable to the beginning of *Twinkle*, as also to the tuning of the cello strings to a fifth apart. So children could be shown that *Twinkle* can be played starting on any string. At some point soon, the pupil can learn D major scale, using all the *Solfa* notes, and musical alphabet names. From here, the

concept of an octave can be demonstrated, and this is especially useful as part of learning to play with good intonation. Eventually, pupils can be asked, for example, to find all the C's on the cello.

Tones and semitones can be demonstrated on the piano keyboard, or spatially, using appropriately spaced objects laid out on the floor. Up until now, string names (A,D,G,C) will have been used, together with finger numbers. At *Lightly Row* can come the introduction of the concept of an F#, and the explanation that this is an interval of 3rd - *Soh Mi*. Where note-values are concerned, *Go Tell Aunt Rhody* is a good place to start to teach the idea of crochets, quavers and minims.

For certain pupils, especially the very young, or dyslexic, the *Stringbabies* method of teaching note-reading can be adapted well to the Suzuki method. Here, pitch is introduced first, with rhythm soon after - with the use of different shapes for each note, on a large and easy to read staff. A whiteboard with magnetic shapes is useful for quick demonstration of key, time-signature and bar lines, and allows the child to create their own compositions from an early stage. At the same time, flashcards can be introduced to teach the rhythms using crochets, quavers, semiquavers and minims, and again, pupils can make up their own rhythms to sing and clap. Also, once the concept of pitch has been introduced, again, flashcards of notes on a staff can be used to familiarise the pupil with how sheet music looks in their book. *Long Long Ago* is a good piece with which to start to introduce the concept of reading pitch in a tune.

It must be said, however, that the above activities should be introduced at first as a fun way of adding variety to a lesson, and kept separate from the process of building the good technique that is necessary to thoroughly learn and memorise the pieces in the Suzuki repertoire. Sooner or later, this material will start to be gradually integrated when note-values and rhythms are recognised in the pieces. By the time the pupil reaches *Allegretto* - depending of course on the individual - they may be encouraged to read the entire piece from the page. Until then, there is a wealth of material which can be used to familiarise pupils with note-reading. Almost from the start, simple open-string duets from *Cello Time Joggers* or *A Flying Start for Strings*, at first learnt by ear and then perhaps written out on a larger staff, could be used as a simple, fun activity. *A Flying Start for Strings* is particularly user-friendly, with simple tunes on a large staff, often set to words:

*A is the highest string, lives on the highest line; D lives on the 3rd line, D lives on the middle line; G-lives-here on the first line; C is so low it needs two extra lines.*

*I Can Read Music* could follow on from the basic *Stringbabies* material, especially for older students. Again, the material is set out on an easy-to-read large staff, and can easily be used at home, with pupils taking satisfaction in ticking off each exercise in pitch or rhythm. Rhythm pages can be clapped first before playing, and Pitch pages can be sung at pitch, using note names, before playing. Pupils can be encouraged to keep their eyes a little bit ahead to prepare for what is coming next, and parents can help by tapping a steady beat. Once this material has been covered - if the pupil is preparing for ABRSM Grade 1, *Improve your Sight-reading* could then be introduced. By this time, the student may be comfortable enough with reading notes from the large staff, to progress to a more grown-up smaller one. The book combines rhythm work with learning basic note-reading skills, and pupils are encouraged to look out for patterns such as scales, arpeggios and intervals.

In this way, theory can be integrated into lessons, and can be carried over into discussions of whichever piece the student is currently studying. This can continue with teaching how to recognise key signatures (*Father Charles Goes Down and Ends Battle*; *Battle Ends and Down Goes Father Charles*), and the recognition of patterns of sharps and flats in scales and their fingering, and tonality in pieces. The concept of major and minor can be introduced with *Aunt Rhody goes to Egypt* and *Sad Song of the Wind*, and in group lessons, listening games could further develop this.

Improvisation in group or private lessons is a good way of learning about rhythm, without the constraints of the written page. For example, the teacher sets up a simple four-note ostinato, inviting pupils in turn to say, then play something in a rhythm which fits in well. This could be based around names, animals, weather, food - and played on open strings or a limited selection of notes.

To further pupils' understanding of time-signature and subdividing the beat, flashcards of note values and rests could be grouped by pupils into bars of 3/4 or 4/4 time, and other more complex time-signatures as time goes on. This is excellent preparation work for any more advanced composing the pupil may later wish to do, whether or not to meet the requirements for any theory or GCSE exams that they choose to undertake. Technique can also be tied in, as the pupil learns how to divide the bow.

For work on dynamics, group lessons could include activities such as, for instance *Hunt the Treasure*, where the class plays a tune louder or softer depending on whether the pupil is 'hot' or 'cold'. Again, this should go hand in hand with learning the technique to be able to produce the various types of sound.

Having learnt about dynamics experientially, the pupil will also learn about these and other performance symbols on the printed page. While these can be explained as they occur - like other aspects of theory, it will be of benefit to the student to become familiar with them using, for example, flashcard games or using specific pieces of music for analysis and demonstration by the teacher.

The concept of *Simultaneous Learning* emphasises the importance of making connections between all the musical ingredients of a piece - first involving the pupil in identifying ingredients such as key, time signature, character, rhythmic ideas, sequences, tempo, form, intervals, dynamics, articulations. These are taught thoroughly, and the first few bars of the piece might be used as a starting point for an improvisation or technical exercise. Paul Harris describes the approach as '*a continuous deconstruction of musical elements followed by a reconstruction in a much more understanding manner*'. This is quite similar to the idea of using tonalizations to isolate aspects of a piece. In a lesson or practice session, the pupil might work with a 'practice map', starting by practicing the scale of the piece, and gradually making connections between all the different ingredients. In this way, each can be thought about carefully, so as to be able to understand the piece better as a whole, and apply what has been learnt to any other music they might be playing or studying.

The *Right at Sight* series of books is useful also, and has been popular with my adult and older students, who love to work right through the book. Organised systematically into keys, and covering specific styles, time-signatures and kinds of bow articulation, its focus on sight-reading also applies to learning to note-read - though the format is less suitable for young beginners. It can be dipped into to find an easy piece or duet which relates to material currently being learnt, and thinking specifically about Time-signature, Rhythm and Key (TRaK) before starting to play, is another way of working with the separate ingredients of the music, for good mental preparation.

### Conclusion

In this way, we can see how an integrated and multi-sensory approach to listening skills, technique, musicality, note-reading and theory contributes to producing well-rounded musicians. If this is achieved, the pupil will be well prepared not only to progress competently through increasingly advanced repertoire, but also for all aspects of grade and theory exams should they wish to go down this route. Whichever path they choose will be made all the easier if parents impart their own love of music from an early age, or even before birth - with exposure to recordings and performances, singing and dancing with their children, and playful physicality.

### Useful teaching materials

Stringbabies - Kay Tucker

I can read music - Joanne Martin

Improve your sight-reading - Paul Harris

Cello Time Joggers - Blackwell

A Flying Start for Strings - Cello Book 1 - Jennifer Thorp

Right at Sight, Grades 1 to 5 - Caroline Lumsden

Animal name rhythm flashcards - TTS

Rhythm and pitch flashcards from Layton Music online free Games and Resources

## Reference Books

Simultaneous Learning - Paul Harris

Music Mind Games - Michiko Yurko